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Mephisto: István Szabó and "the Gestapo of Suspicion"

Since 1961, István Szabó has made sixteen films. Like many others, I became aware of him only after seeing *Confidence* at the New York Film Festival. While meeting Szabó his lucid sensibility reminded me more of poets like Seferis or Neruda than of any director I had ever met; I was not surprised when he said that his major inspiration was "the works of Hungarian poets you have probably never heard about . . ." I hope some day to hear about these poets; but I was satisfied by sensing their presence at a second viewing of *Confidence*, where what Szabó calls the "Gestapo of suspicion" haunts the sexual union of a sympathetic yet Stalinist partisan and a frightened yet sensually alive woman on the run from the Nazis in Budapest. The

liaison is fragmented at film's end: like a true poet, Szabó leaves the eternal strife between the poetry of Eros and the sneering Gestapo of Thanatos floating horribly on the surface of our watching minds.

The film-poet draws an even clearer bead on the Gestapo of suspicion in *Mephisto*. Szabó's Faust is an actor, a narcissist Everyman, a sexual adventurer, a post-Brechtian artist, and even a philanthropist. The filmic strategy is related to that of Schlöndorff's treatment of *The Tin Drum*. But *The Tin Drum* is a masterpiece as a novel, while Klaus Mann's *Mephisto* is a strangely defective *roman à clef*. Nevertheless, there is a similar grappling with titans: Schlöndorff with Günter Grass and Szabó with Goethe. Klaus Mann



should merely be seen as a kind of go-between, a second-rate signpost pointing in the direction of *Faust*. When Szabó's ex-leftist, Goering-loving actor-machiavel performs in a massive, Nazi-produced *Faust*—one of the most brilliant dramatic film sequences since Orson Welles, the Olivier of *Richard III* and Kurosawa—we can feel the heat of what George Steiner has shown to be an unholy fusion between Kultur and barbarism in the idealizing Reich of *Blut und Boden*. As even the most unadventurous scholar of *Faust* will admit, Goethe's scholar-Faust seduced by the Devil is an uncanny prophecy of the Eichmann Generation. Goethe, of course, seems unreachable to many of us: after all, the symbolic complexity of *Faust* is almost too "Germanic." But Szabó has found an objective correlative for this sound and fury: the Nazi spotlights that stun his actor-hero in the truly great scene at the end of *Mephisto*. Perhaps this searing light is related to the blinding of Faust at the end of Goethe's play (as well as the shattering scream of Oskar in *The Tin Drum*). These terrifying spotlights represent the psychotic violence hidden within the seductive surfaces of both Mephistopheles and (as Szabó reveals in this interview) Adolf Hitler. Szabó's hero is heroic in the sense that he looks at and understands this destructive and thrilling entity that he has encouraged to seduce him, and that has brought him the dream of theatrical fame. This mythopoeic hero, blinded (at least temporarily) like Oedipus, has glimpsed the psychotic fury behind the utopian delusion of Blood and Earth united with an all-seeing, omnipotent Leader.



How did you first become interested in filming the Klaus Mann novel?

All my films until this one have been based on my own screenplays. But for a long while I'd been trying to zero in on a literary work that might inspire my filmic imagination, and enable me to get outside myself. The idea was to free the more purely directorial side of my imagination. I was beginning to feel like one of those do-it-yourself types who draws up the blueprints for a new house, cuts the wood, constructs the building, and even makes the furniture by hand. And in truth the screenplays I had written had begun to seem a little boring to me. I wanted to specialize at being only a director . . .

At about that time the West Berlin producer, Manfred Durniok, sent me a copy of Klaus Mann's *Mephisto*. Immediately after reading it, I felt it would make a great subject for a film. Not that the book has outstanding literary qualities, or is even a very good novel: in fact, the structure is rather flimsy and the characters a bit simplistic. But I found the life story of the central character to be thrilling and intense. A peripheral figure, an actor, is seduced by and gets very near to a nerve-center of the vast web of Nazi power. At the same time, he remains highly ambivalent about what he is doing. I felt that the novel delineated a universal problem concerning twentieth-century intellectuals: the relationship between history and the individual. So I told Mr. Durniok that I was certain a powerful film could be made from this novel.

So we began together to organize the production of *Mephisto*. I began to feel that I was drawing a certain strength from the inadequacies of the novel. One shouldn't make a film based on a *really* good novel, because such a novel has already found its authentic form, which is to be *read*. Its inevitable destiny is the experience of those who read it. Films should be made from novels that have not crystallized into this authentic form, but which still have something important that can be developed: a character, a story, a leitmotif, etc. We tried to extract and develop the vital ore which I found in this novel.

Was there also some influence from your previous film, Confidence, which was also set in the Nazi era?

Of course. In both films, a single theme is predominant: what the twentieth century has done to the human being. As has often been said, a crucial frailty resides in human nature: we are often unable to carry out the more difficult tasks set for us by history. But it's not always people who are to blame for that. The human tasks set by history in this century may be unique in their difficulty. As has also been stated, history is a kind of director deciding the roles we play in our individual lives. We may accept the roles allotted to us, while not having the capability or talent to appropriately enact them. But the dice are thrown by history, and it's difficult to cry out, "I don't care about this role that has been given me, I want to free myself from it . . . I cannot play such a big role, my personality is inadequate for it."



Returning to *Mephisto*, I of course began to delve into the real-life aspects of the story. As you probably know, the author Klaus Mann (son of Thomas Mann) was related to the famous actor, Gustav Gründgens, who was the husband of his sister. The rest of the family circle emigrated, but the formerly left-wing actor remained, and became a kind of shop-window showpiece during the Nazi period. The novel contains a polemically hateful portrait of its protagonist. Our task was not to show simplistic characters, in black-and-white fashion, but to recreate the human nuances of the real-life story.

At the end of Mephisto, where the character panics in the midst of the Nuremberg spotlight thrown by his mentor Goering, I suddenly thought of the end of Confidence, where the male protagonist cries out in a touching yet infantile way for the woman he has lost and never understood. Which made me think of the way the Nazis, as shown in Schlöndorff's The Tin Drum, manipulated the infantile-dependency needs of those they wished to control. Isn't that true of an obviously narcissistic type like Gründgens?

Well, yes, I would accept this analysis. I must say that I would use a different terminology. But I accept this view of Gründgens. If we decide to plunge into depth-psychology, our points-of-view will meet. You may talk about infantile behavior. I might talk about anxiety, about being scared. But our different terminologies meet in the dark room of childhood. And in this dark room, as Bergman shows, the child in us is frightened by those inevitable dark shadows. And because the child is afraid of the shadows in this dark room,

he often does things that are not good for him. There is that powerful urge to fight against insecurity. Insecurity manifests itself in different ways. So security is sought within the warm embrace of the family, which gives protection, friendship, work, political and social recognition. Everybody needs at least one of these. Otherwise you feel lost in the world. People like Gründgens are afraid of isolation, and try to defend against this. The hero of *Confidence* has protected himself by means of his hermetic point of view. In the course of the story you realize that one cannot live in that way. This is brought about by the influence of the woman whom he has to hide from the Gestapo. He has been defending himself by playing roles. This is the only defense he can find. Then, after being with the woman, he finds that the roles have become invalid, his soul has been nakedly exposed to the light. He suddenly has this frantic need to escape from his roles. In terms of such an analysis, I fully agree with your comments.

This may perhaps enable us to bring up Goethe's Faust. After all, Mephisto is certainly giving Goethe's hero a much-needed sense of security. While Mephisto has a destructive potential that competes with Iago, Macbeth, Goneril and Regan . . . Do you agree with the statement of Goering in the film that Mephisto is a "German national hero," which Goering says after seeing Gründgens play Mephisto in an elaborate, Nazi-financed production of Faust?

You should not take that dialogue too seriously; you should, however, take the character seriously. General Goering is also an actor, playing a role. He says lots of stupid things in order to seem erudite. You could say that the Germans were seduced by the Mephisto-consciousness. And this applies to other nations as well. The trick is to give people the appearance of security. This film is, among other things, about the ability to be seduced. The reference-point is intellectuals, but it really applies to everybody. Almost everyone, alas, is standing at the corner waiting to be seduced. There are two possibilities. Either one feels good about it, and then, years later, says "Oh, how horrible that I was seduced!" Or else, one doesn't like it and says so.

As for the intellectuals, the security problem is greater than it is for those who work with their hands in fields or factories. Those who

work with their hands follow more closely what the powerful are doing: after all, they are directly affected by the machinations of power. Of course, they know their destiny is linked to these machinations, and that they must relate to them in order to get what they want. They must be aware of the economic realities: who will be paying their salaries, for example. And the weaker among them will follow the way the wind blows. Even if treason against their former masters is necessary. And this treasonous dynamic may be even more powerful among certain strata of the intellectuals, as exemplified by Gründgens. For such a man, the right connections mean more than anything else.

The security-lust, in the Nazi period as well as in our own, is probably most evident among the petit-bourgeoisie. How volatile their panic when their bank accounts diminish in value or disappear entirely! Or when they hear that a plane has been hijacked by terrorists. They begin to scream loudly against the chaotic world that seems to affront them. They push for a strong, authoritarian center of power which will assure jobs, order in the streets, public morality. In other words, a return to the "clean-living" Good Old Days. This was the mood at the end of the 1920s. It's not an accident that Hitler managed to seize power in those uncertain times. And he was not the only one capable of seducing a nation. History enabled similar characters to emerge elsewhere. Unfortunately, in the current period, there is such a situation. There is a nostalgia in many parts of the world for the emergence of leaders who could bring about such a simplistic and dangerous kind of "order." This is the evil chemistry behind the explosion of a military coup. This is the evil psychology behind those who suddenly proclaim themselves to be the Fathers of their Nations.

How ironic that this willing pawn of the Mephisto-seduction, Gründgens (or Höfgen, as he's called in the film), had earlier been a "proletarian" actor working for a Brechtian theater group!

In the real-life situation, it was a working-class theater group, not specifically Brechtian. I chose the piece by Brecht in which he performs during the film. It seemed to me historically appropriate to do so.

I guess it seemd "ironic" to me because the New Realism which directors like yourself and Schlöndorff and some of the Australians have

recently brought about is, in many ways, a reaction against the didactic and narrowly naturalistic "Brechtianism" of post-'68 "politicized" directors like Godard and Fassbinder. During an interview I did with him, Schlöndorff quite forcefully asserted that his early "Brechtianism" has been superseded by an awareness of the poetic realism of Shakespeare's plays . . . Though this shouldn't negate the occasionally useful critical consciousness behind Godard and Fassbinder, or, on a larger scale, behind Brecht—who is quite Shakespearean in a play like The Caucasian Chalk Circle . . .

I'm similarly ambivalent about Brecht. But I should say that I love Brecht very much and am tremendously interested in his plays. He was a unique influence on the theater of his epoch. But he is not an idol for me. It's true that there are two Brechts, and that the film is critical of the narrowly didactic Brecht.

I've often noticed that the power of some of the greatest films—such as Ugetsu or The Grand Illusion or Ikiru—flows from the way the final shots of the film create a kind of epiphany which mysteriously gathers together the strands of symbolism of the whole film; and I felt this during that blinding conclusion of Mephisto.

I thank you for the compliment, though I can't say whether I deserve it. It seemed quite inevitable. Goering's blinding spotlights on the newly-created stage of Nuremberg. The hero's sudden realization that his pact with the Devil has brought him to the point where he cannot distinguish between reality and role. Or perhaps the role has become so overpowering that he must flee the stage. Or perhaps it is just the horrible glare of evil blinding him into the truth . . . In the end, things become too complex for him. Before that, it was simpler. He could relate his personality to the role he had to play. After all, he felt the need to be loved by others. He lived for nothing but success. And now he has it, but is suddenly overwhelmed by the fire and brimstone of these terrifying spotlights that Goering, with demonic childishness, playfully shoots at him from every direction.

During a recent press screening, I overheard John Simon, who otherwise liked the film, making vaguely negative remarks about the way you had excised the real-life and novelistic homosexuality of Gründgens.

Karen
Boyd
and
Klaus
Mann
Brandauer:
MEPHISTO.



As it happens, I was the one who told John Simon about this change. And Simon seemed skeptical about this change. So I asked him, "Does a character's homosexuality necessarily have to have anything to do with his collaboration with the Nazis?" I certainly didn't feel that I had to make the kind of connections that Visconti made concerning homosexuality and the Nazis. I feel that it's a great danger to do so. I wanted the audience to identify with the hero of this film. Especially in such a political film as this, which is about a movement that is now almost universally despised, and which raises the horrible enigma of collaboration for current-day audiences, I wanted to evoke a collective sense of questioning among my audience: could they make the same mistakes, could they submit to evil in the same way . . . To achieve this goal, we could not have a hero who would divert attention into another area. The homosexual theme is on a psychological plane: it has nothing to do with the film's concerns. In fact, in the novel there is no explicit focus on homosexuality. Klaus Mann was going in a different direction. His hero had a perverted sexual relation with a black dancer. He gets a masochistic thrill from being beaten by her. I decided to drop that from the story. I didn't want to give people the chance to say, "This man is collaborating with the Nazis because he is a pervert and a fetishist; and since I am not

a pervert and fetishist, I could not collaborate with the Nazis . . ." The evil of Nazism does not result from perversion and homosexuality. Fascism and anti-Semitism are ultimately a special kind of perversion: the perversion of the soul. One must show this essential horror of the distortion of the human spirit. So you must get the "normal" audience, so vulnerable to this soul-perversion, to identify with the character.

But your character is not really that "normal"; after all, he's an actor . . .

I wouldn't say that he's not typical just because he's an actor. For him the important thing is to have success all the time, whatever the cost. He is a genius at adapting himself to unpredictable situations. Aren't there many people like this who are not professional actors? Of course, for an actor success has a special radiance. But the moral is almost painfully universal: you should not strive for success at any cost.

So the Mephistophelean pseudo-orgasm of success, in Mephisto, fills the interpersonal void created, in Confidence, by the Stalinist central character who has to feel suspicion—a suspicion coming more from Hitler than Stalin—for the woman with whom he has had such an unexpected and beautiful sexual encounter?

Yes, that's in the films—you can find it in the films. *Confidence* was a film about what

fascism can do to the souls of human beings. I wanted to show that even after they made love, after they achieved this unexpected intimacy, the Gestapo of suspicion continued to prevail.

Were you aware of actual relationships where such a thing occurred?

Yes. Of course. It's a terrible psychological reality. But Western intellectuals often emphasize the depth-psychological aspects of this Gestapo of suspicion while ignoring the political aspects. We who lived through those terrible times are not able to reduce everything to case-history. We have a more complicated, yet simpler, view of these things. So we want to do nothing more than tell the story of what has happened to us. Intellectuals are, of course, free to analyze *Mephisto* however they wish. But they should not neglect to see themselves as caught in the role which engulfs my central character. Fame is the most subtle of seducers.

As we mentioned previously concerning the pseudo-Brechtians, polemical omnipotence can be a subtle seducer for intellectuals . . .

Fortunately, I'm not as clever as I seem to be. The pseudo-Brechtians and the Godardians are too complex for me. In general, people are inspired by stories that illuminate their

lives and their inmost selves. It's necessary that they are able to identify with the hero of a work of art. It's masochistic to deny the validity of the experiential dimension of art: the cathartic element. You might mention Aristotle, but Shakespeare and Chekhov are not bad either.

Speaking of catharsis, I have to return to the final scene with the actor blinded by the spotlights . . .

Don't forget the film was about a man who wanted to always dominate the spotlights: now he has got it!

What is "it"?

As we said, he's a man who yearned for the honey of success, to always live on the sunny side of the street. To always be the *center of attention*. This was his great struggle. Now he has made it. And now, b!inded and afraid, he must ask: is this what he really wanted? Perhaps he will now question all the effort which has brought him to this terrifying situation.

It's a kind of . . . illumination . . .

Exactly. An illumination. And a catharsis—a purging and a cleansing.

That blinding light—perhaps Hitler, perhaps the presence of the Devil?

Exactly.

Reviews

CONFIDENCE

(Bizalom) Director: István Szabó. Script by Szabó, from a story by Erika Szanto. Photography: Lajos Koltai. Music: György Ség and Tabor Polgar. New Yorker Films.

Confidence is about unrequited trust. In all of Szabó's films, he has tried to show how man's destiny slips from his grasp, as historical and geographical realities impinge on free will. For Szabó, hope lies in the emotional force which develops between people no matter how dark and threatening their past, present, or future seems, nor how unwilling they may be to enter into that kind of metahistorical play of passions. "It's bigger than most of us," Szabó said at the Berlin festival where he was about to receive the "Bear" for best direction of *Confidence*. Szabó ignores the fact that most of what one can say or show about love is cliché-ridden; thus it is a tribute to his sensitivity—

as well as polite recognition of his repetitious denial that his films are autobiographical—to say that he taps the well-spring of clichés to show us what human flaws and virtues we all partake of.

A simple story, *Confidence* shows two people forced together by historical events (rather than forced apart as in *Lovefilm* or *Der Grüne Vogel*), who ultimately find it impossible to commit themselves to loving each other. Therefore, trust is the more pertinent topic: can people who do not trust each other love each other? It depends upon their reasons for distrust. Szabó allows an old newsreel to speak for him in the opening scene: "*To know the causes of those terribly frightening noises you hear during an air raid mitigates fear,*" says the announcer in that upbeat tenor of World War II correspondents. "Different aircraft produce different noises, identifiable to the